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 JOURNAL APPEARED
 ON PAGE A15.

WASHINGTON POST
 3 February 1986

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Rogue Elephant in the Senate

A private poll by Sen. David Durenberger of his Intelligence Committee, showing a narrow margin (reported to us as 8 to 7) opposed to secret aid for Jonas Savimbi's Angolan freedom fighters, threw a roadblock in front of President Reagan's plan to resist the Soviet offensive in southern Africa before the plan could be launched.

That does not weaken Reagan's intent to shore up Savimbi's battle against the Soviet-backed Angolan government and to 35,000 Cuban troops. But Senate opposition makes the president's course more difficult and perhaps ultimately impossible.

This shows why the "rogue elephant" epithet used a decade ago against the Central Intelligence Agency may now apply to the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Under the chairmanship of the Minnesota Republican, the committee has changed drastically. No longer a sealed-lip oversight panel working cooperatively with the CIA, it has become an open-mouthed engine of publicity. The conversion from quiet oversight has brought the panel a role never envisioned for it: dictation of national security policy for the U.S. government.

Durenberger is not alone in bringing the Intelligence Committee into its new incarnation. Sen. Patrick J. Leahy, the Democratic vice chairman, has been even more vocal in policymaking than Durenberger. That has caused Leahy's popularity to soar in Vermont, where he faces a potentially tough reelection race. It has tied Reagan's hands in Washington.

But the tone of any committee is set by its chairman, who creates its atmosphere and political culture. Durenberger publicly ruled out covert aid to Savimbi in an interview with The Washington Post Jan. 27, the day the Angolan guerrilla leader arrived in Washington to plead his case. Any help for Savimbi's UNITA freedom fighters should be public, Durenberger insisted. But Secretary of State George Shultz, backed by Reagan, has vetoed overt assistance on the grounds that it could not be openly funneled through South Africa and Zaire.

Right-wing authoritarian rule in the Philippines is treated differently from Marxist-Leninist dictatorships in Angola and Nicaragua by the chairman of the Intelligence Committee. On National Public Radio last Oct. 25, he said that if Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos neither reforms nor resigns, "it may well be in the national security interests of this country to take intelligence another step beyond its information-gathering capabilities."

That implies a covert operation dwarfing undercover aid to Savimbi or to the Nicaraguan contras, which Durenberger almost single-handedly stymied last year.

As Committee chairman, Durenberger has all but declared war on Marcos. The chairman refused expenditures for a stop in Manila Jan. 13 by a committee delegation headed by Sen. Orrin Hatch unless the traveling senators agreed not to see Marcos. Angry senators informed Durenberger that neither he nor Bernard McMahon, appointed a year ago by the chairman as the committee's chief of staff, could dictate where to go and not to go. Durenberger relented, but the Hatch delegation by then had cancelled the Manila stop.

McMahon has managed the committee's transformation under Durenberger. A Navy protege of Adm. Stansfield Turner, he served in the Carter administration when then-CIA director Turner opposed and substantially dismantled the agency's ability to perform covert operations.

Speaking not for attribution, one

committee member told us that relations between McMahon and William Casey's CIA are deteriorating. He confirmed the report to us from another Senate source that McMahon castigated Casey in the privacy of the committee's chambers just after Soviet KGB officer Vitaly Yurchenko redefected to Moscow. (Durenberger told us he had not heard of the incident. McMahon could not be reached by us.)

Apart from such personal unpleasantness, the Durenberger committee's policymaking role and the gap between it and the CIA pose a serious question transcending aid to Savimbi and resistance to Soviet moves in southern Africa: Can a president get his own policy in place before being rolled by the Senate's rogue elephant?

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